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ABSTRACT

This topical bibliography and commentary discusses several classroom techniques designed to encourage beginning writers to grow beyond uninspired composition. The strategies employed in the classroom are of equal value for both expository and creative writing. The various classroom techniques discussed share an emphasis on student-centered learning that prioritizes interaction and physicality over a traditional lecture format. These alternative techniques include the use of writing workshops, literature-based mini-lessons, and creative dramatics to encourage clearer, more lively writing. The incidental (although key) by-products of these strategies are increased student interest and greater interaction among students and teachers. (Contains 14 references and 2 Internet addresses.) (RS)

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Writing: Classroom Techniques

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Introduction

Several classroom techniques designed to encourage beginning writers to grow beyond uninspired composition are discussed below. The strategies employed in the classroom are of equal value for both expository and creative writing. The various classroom techniques discussed share an emphasis on student-centered learning that prioritizes interaction and physicality over a traditional lecture format. These alternative techniques include the use of writing workshops, literature-based mini-lessons, and creative dramatics to encourage clearer, more lively writing. The incidental (although key) by-products of these strategies are increased student interest and greater interaction among students and teachers.

The Value of Writing: Classroom Techniques

As Jan Sutton (1998) points out, for many years the basic tools of composition were believed to be "a grammar handbook, a dictionary, a traditional outline, the five-paragraph theme formula, and perhaps a thesaurus" (1). All these tools were primarily designed for use by the student in isolation, which is less likely to be a problem for the already proficient writer than for those students for whom writing often seems "a mysterious and often frustrating activity" (1). Although most teachers likely experiment beyond the lecture and individual assignment approach, alternative classroom techniques offer greater opportunities for student self-expression and instructor creativity. The creative energy flowing between students and teachers seems almost palpable in enthusiastic comments such as, "Their please for five more minutes of writing time makes my heart skip a beat" (Lunsford, 1997), p. 48).

Writing Workshop in a Primary Grade Classroom

The great majority of educators, as evidenced in these articles, advocate some form of a writing workshop. Interactive in nature, writing workshops provide beginning writers with valuable feedback from fellow students and teachers. The actual methods employed within the workshops vary, as does their regularity of use. Susan Lunsford (1997) sees the writing workshop as an opportunity for students to first listen to published authors of children's literature (the "experts") and then to craft their own stories based upon these models. Barbara Boone (1996) gives outlines for 73 different mini-lessons that can be adapted and utilized by the teacher either as time allows or perhaps on a more consistent basis. Each of Boone's lessons is designed to enable creative experimentation by the students. Editors Christopher Edgar and Ron Padgett's (1995) approach is similar to Boone's in that they provide a number of self-contained mini-lessons which can be utilized by the teacher when deemed appropriate or as time allows.

Although several authors offer lesson plans and tips designed for a teacher's occasional or semi-consistent use, other authors advocate the regular inclusion of these mini-lessons. Bobbi Fisher (1995) describes the five components of a "dynamic and meaningful" Writing Workshop as: "a positive attitude of trust and commitment; an understanding of the process of writing; an orderly arrangement of materials; a predictable daily routine; and a dearly defined role for me as the teacher" (1). "Trust and commitment" indicate Fisher's opinion that writing is essential to literacy development and, as such, it must become a daily exercise in the classroom. "The children trust that they'll have daily opportunities to pursue their own topics, work by themselves or with friends, and begin a new piece every day or work on a story or book over time" (1). Overall, it seems that writing workshops are growing in popularity among teachers, but the form and content of these workshops vary widely.

The Mini-lesson

At the heart of most writing workshops is the recurring use of a mini-lesson. As defined by Nancy Atwell and Lucy Calkins, a mini-lesson is: "a brief meeting that begins the workshop where the whole class addresses an issue that's arisen in previous workshops or in pieces of students' writing. The point of the mini-lesson is to expose students to ideas and information that will be reinforced in individual conferences through the rest of the

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school year" (Qtd. In Lunsford, 1997, p. 42). The level of teacher interaction with the students differs according to author, some suggesting a more structured approach grounded in formal presentations followed by student activity and others adopting a more hands-off approach which prioritizes peer interaction and creative serendipity.

Susan Lunsford's (1997) approach is an example of a mini-lesson wherein the instructor's presentation is most clearly central. Lunsford contends that the "mini-lesson is also an opportunity to share personal knowledge about writing" (p. 42). Lunsford's use of "expert" examples of good writing, taken from accessible children's literature, is an effective classroom technique for teaching students the differences between dull and exciting writing. Specifically, Lunsford discusses three areas where this technique improved the writing of her young students:

> In the literature-based mini-lessons, we explored questions such as: 1) How do the experts start a story?; 2) What kind of exciting words do they use to make their stories enjoyable?; 3) What do the experts include to make their stories complete? This article shows how I used literature in my first- and second-grade multi-age classroom of mostly white, rural, middle-class children to answer these questions and help my students think about and improve their writing in these three areas. (p. 43)

Through verbatim accounts, Lunsford illustrates how literature-based mini-lessons enabled a number of her students to move beyond story beginnings such as "Hello, my name is..." to beginnings that provoke greater interest in the reader, such as what one student wrote: "One day I was walking in the woods and was whistling a little tune. It was real sunny. There were big oak trees and pine. It was a wonderful picture until..." (p. 44). While the efforts of the students need not match the quality of the "experts," the influence of published children's literature is evidenced in the students' increased experimentation. Of course, results among individual students varied, but Lunsford describes how even the students who wrote with the most unadorned, one-sentence descriptors eventually borrowed ideas and images from the experts. Lunsford remarks: "Not all of the students were capable of bringing the richness of literature to their writing, but without exception, all were demonstrating a growing awareness of language. I continued to provide patience and a literature-rich environment" (p. 44). Sam Swope (1998) describes how he introduces immigrants to the poetry of Wallace Stevens; first eliciting their responses and then encouraging their own attempts.

Terrence Stange (1996) also uses printed materials (books and picture books) as a starting point from which students are then encouraged to create their own humorous parodies. Stange is mostly concerned with the students' appreciation of the rhythm and rhyming patterns found in texts. Using an established pattern as their touchstone, students develop a parody through classroom exercises such as brainstorming, editing, and sharing—all of which culminates in a "published" story book. Similarly, Bobbi Fisher (1995) guides young writers through the process of producing a book ready for publication. An understanding of the process of writing is delineated by Fisher into five steps: rehearsal, drafting, revising, editing and sharing. While the first four steps are adapted from other sources, Fisher considers "sharing" as her contribution to the mix. Rehearsal is often preliminary to actual writing, although it can occur during as well, and it involves thinking, talking and reading as a way of planning what will be written. Drafting is the actual writing of the piece and is still interspersed with thinking and talking. Editing helps the student finalize a project with the help of the teacher, parent, or another student with the idea of "publishing" the piece in conventional form, which includes the nuts and bolts process of conventionalizing spelling and grammar. Sharing can take many different forms, from showing the piece to a friend to reading it aloud from the "author's chair."

Group Participation

Even when teacher presentation is a more formal component of the mini-lesson, the importance of a student's interaction with his or her peers is also emphasized (Stemper, 2002). Most of the time, this interaction is through either games or role playing.

Addressing the difficulty that much of what is offered in the classroom seems "alien" and "pointless" to many students, Jan Sutton (1998) advocates the use of creative drama techniques as "the vehicle for those students whose strengths lie outside the verbal/linguistic and mathematical/logical realms to carry them to success in expository or creative writing" (p. 4). Sutton utilizes creative dramatics as a means for student exploration and experimentation. Sutton distinguishes creative dramatics from theatre arts: "Creative drama, not to be confused with theatre art, is the use of informal, improvisational, student-centered theatre exercises and activities with the emphasis placed on process rather than product" (p. 1). This definition of creative dramatics builds upon Charles Combs' opinion: "The primary differentiation between creative drama and theatre art is that creative drama is not practiced for the purpose of audience entertainment" (Qtd. in Sutton, p. 1). The role playing aspect of creative drama facilitates actions and decisions that mirror real-life situations. Both Combs and Laura Gardner Salazar identify reflection as the key component of creative dramatics: "The action of the drama is valuable only if it leads to reflection" (Salazar, qtd. in Sutton, p. 1). Sutton further identifies the benefits of creative dramatics as identified by others in the field:

> The benefits of adding creative drama activities to the language arts curriculum are manifold. In *Creative Drama for the Classroom Teacher*, Ruth Beall Heinig writes about "the importance of creative drama as a means of enhancing reading, the study of literature, oral language and vocabulary development, nonverbal communication, listening ability, and creative writing." That "drama has the potential to bring alive the printed page" is accepted by most language arts teachers (Wilkinson), who often use story dramatization to improve oral communication and reading skills. However, evidence also suggests that the use of creative drama for teaching both expository and creative writing can produce similarly positive results. (p. 2)

The use of creative dramatics has the advantage of involving the student on a physical and not just intellectual basis. Unfortunately, at the secondary level, physicality is often removed from the writing process and students are expected to simply sit at their desks and write in isolation. The absence of physical involvement, argues Sutton, contradicts what is widely accepted as the natural learning process whereby "experience is coded first by the muscles, then the senses, then memory, and finally reason" (J. Moffett, qtd. in Sutton, 2). At the heart of creative drama is role playing and active engagement between students and teacher. Expressing emotions through physical and verbal means allows the student to experiment with risk-taking. "The creative drama experience gives students the chance to experience vicariously and safely situations about which they are now able to write because their role playing has enhanced their vocabulary and stirred their imaginations" (Sutton, 2). Such experimentation is especially valuable in allowing students to vicariously experience the multiple perspectives needed for successful persuasive writing. Furthermore, problem solving skills are enhanced by requiring the student to slow down and focus attention on the problem at hand. Sutton states that the four central elements of creative drama parallel the elements of fiction: "character, environment (setting), playable action (plot and conflict), and thought (theme)" (Qtd. in Sutton, 3). Role playing allows the student to place "real" people in difficult situations and forces the student to experiment with problem solving.

Maryann Manning (1996) offers suggestions for eliciting responses from students and, again, creative dramatics are integral to this process. Manning suggests that the form of the creative dramatics might include drama presentations, media presentations or other artistic representations.

Writing Space

Most authors insist on the importance of space. Along with regularity, it is essential that the students begin to associate classroom space with the writing process. Whether the writing space is singular or manifold, the writing space should encourage interaction and experimentation. The designation of a "writing area" within the classroom further emphasizes the regularity and predictability that are necessary to what Fisher terms "trust." Writing materials are located in the writing area and students are assigned a designated work space for a set period of time (usually eight weeks). A predictable daily routine means that students know they must get ready to write by arranging their folders and supplies in the proper places.

Student Empowerment

Another important result of using these student-centered writing techniques is the student's sense of empowerment. Teachers sharing decision-making power with students is one of the features of writing workshop approaches (Burns, 2001). Allowing the students the authority to determine the direction of their writing and problem solving helps to overcome the fear that they can never measure up to the "expert" examples set before them. Students feel much more freedom to experiment when the classroom exercises include interactive games and role playing, especially in comparison to sitting by oneself with a pen, a sheet of paper, and a set of rigid instructions. "Using creative drama restores some of the students' autonomy and encourages them to choose the direction their own writing should take" (Sutton, 3). Group activities allow for multiple responses and intellectual flexibility that, in turn, better inform the student's actual writing.

Creative drama can be a particularly useful tool at any point in the writing process. Theatre games and activities help students develop trust and imagination. While the specific games that are available to the teacher are myriad, Sutton uses Peter Farb's characteristics of a "language game" as a way of building effective collaborative skills:

1. It has a minimum of two players.
2. Social pressure may force even bystanders to play.
3. Something must be at stake for both players.
4. Players are usually distinguished by their particular style and by their ability to shift styles if needed.
5. Finally, like all games it is structured by rules people learn unconsciously as part of the discourse community. (Qtd. in Sutton, 4)

One can easily see the theme of empowerment reflected in topics discussed by authors such as Kathi Berreyesa (1996): "authentic writing, freedom of topic choice, and free time to write."

Conclusion

Each of the authors discussed stresses the value of interactive, physicalized learning in place of reliance upon the traditional lecture format and a student's inspiration in isolation. Whether the classroom technique employed is creative drama, a writing workshop, or a group mini-lesson, students are encouraged to collaborate with their peers and to use problem-solving skills to benefit the activity. Each of the authors differs on the teacher's conspicuousness within the activities, from Lunsford's active involvement with both individuals and groups to Sutton's more hands-off approach, but each of them emphasizes the student's own responsibility for learning. Group exercises and presentations, while at times more or less successful, motivate participants into varying degrees of classroom responsibility and interaction. Problem-solving abilities, which are key to successful writing, are encouraged and sharpened in a child's familiar world of play. The most dynamic of situations appears to be the one where classroom space is dedicated to the regular, ongoing process of writing and where each student is made to feel a part of the process. Finally, the classroom techniques advocated have the added benefit of being fun for both students and teachers. These techniques utilize the vigorous physical involvement of play and encourage imaginative skills. The shift in focus found in these writing techniques is from product to process. Even when a finished product is established as the goal (such as a book ready for publication), these techniques emphasize experimentation, drafting, revision, and evaluation as means to that end.

Internet Resources

* How can I teach young writers during Writing Workshops? A Pittsburgh 2nd Grade Teacher shares her experiences and ideas of using writing workshops in a second grade classroom.
http://www.education.pitt.edu/leaders/FAQ/Writing%20Workshops.htm

* Writing Workshop. A step-by-step guide for applying writing workshop. Information regarding storying, mini lessons, conferring, sharing, publishing, assessment, and ISAT writing is included
http://www.springfield.k12.il.us/resources/languagearts/readingwriting/writerworkshop.htm

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